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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000309

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA
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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT ASAD'S CABINET RESHUFFLE

REF: DAMASCUS 00168

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: After months of rumors that President Bashar al-Asad would reshuffle his cabinet, he finally did so on April 23, appointing six new officials to Prime Minister Utri's cabinet. Asad tapped Judge Ahmad Hamud Yunis to be Minister of Justice; Tamer Fu,ad al-Hija as Minister of Local Administration; Mansur Fadlallah Azzam as Presidential Affairs Minister; Kawkab al-Sabah Mohammed Dayeh as Minister of the Environment; and Rida Adnan Sa'id as the Minister of Health. The highest profile appointment was Asad's choice of Major General Sa'id Muhammad Sammour to replace General Bassam Abdel Majid as the new Minister of the Interior. These appointments are widely viewed as an attempt by Asad both to weed out ineffective leaders and shore up power. Given the recent border-smuggling corruption scandal surrounding Hasan Makhluf, some of our interlocutors see the Sammour appointment as Asad,s way of cleaning house. END SUMMARY.

Interior

12. (SBU) The new Minister of the Interior is Major General Sa'id Muhammad Sammour, an Alawite, and the former Deputy Chief of Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI). Born in Jableh in 1950, Sammour has a B.A. in English Literature and a Diploma in Aviation Science and Flying. He has served as Chief of Military Intelligence in Homs and also for the Damascus Region. As Deputy Chief of SMI, Sammour served under former Chief of SMI Asef Shawkat, President Asad's brother-in-law. Sammour replaced Major General Bassam Abdel Majid, who had been brought in after Major General Ghazi Kan'an committed suicide on October 12, 2005. The Ministry of Interior portfolio has been relatively secondary during Abdel Majid's tenure.

Justice

13. (SBU) Ahmad Hamud Yunis, the new Minister of Justice, was born in Ras al-Maara in 1950. He graduated with a decree in law from Damascus University in 1973 and was appointed to the Judicial Circuit in 1975. Since that time he has served as Attorney General and Chief of the Economic Security Court. Between 1997 and 2009, he was Chairman of the Central Commission for Auditing and Inspection. Yunis is a member of the Ba'ath Party and a Sunni. He is married with two sons and

two daughters.

Local Administration

14. (C) Former Governor of Aleppo Tamer Fu'ad al-Hija, a member of the Ba'ath Party's Central Committee, is the new Minister of Local Administration. As governor in Aleppo, he was highly regarded by Syrians and diplomats, having brought a more open work-style to the job and a willingness to listen to local citizens. Prior to his appointment, he held various academic and administrative positions at al-Ba'ath University in Homs, eventually rising to the position of Dean of the Faculty of Civil Engineering in 1994 (Hija received a Ph.D. in Civil Engineering from the Higher Institute of Technology in Leipzig, Germany in 1989). In 1999 he entered local politics as the Chair of Homs City Council. Before becoming Governor of Aleppo, he served as Governor of Damascus Countryside from 2004-2005. In 1997, Hija traveled to the U.S. to study curriculum development and teaching methods through the State Department's Volunteer Visitor (VOLVIS) program. Hija, who was born in Homs in 1959, is married with two daughters and two sons.

Presidential Affairs

15. (C) Mansur Fadlallah 'Azzam, chosen to serve as the Minister of Presidential Affairs, was born in Sweida in 1960.

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Diplomatic sources tell us 'Azzam had been locked in a dysfunctional power struggle with other staff in the office of the President. His elevation to ministerial level indicates a presidential vote of confidence. He is the youngest of the new cabinet members and the only Druze. After receiving a degree in French Literature from Damascus University 1983, 'Azzam completed his postgraduate work in translation in 1985. He then went on to take a diploma in International Relations from the National Institute for Administration in Paris. In 1994 'Azzam joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and between 1995 and 2000 served as a Cultural Affairs officer and then later as the officer in charge of U.S. Congressional affairs at the Syrian Embassy in Washington, D.C. From 2000-2002, 'Azzam held the positions of Counselor and Director of Protocol at the MFA; from 2003-2008 he served as Deputy Chief of Protocol for the Presidency; and finally, between 2008-2009 he held the position of Secretary of the Presidency. 'Azzam is a member of the Ba'ath Party. He is married and has three daughters.

Environmental Affairs

16. (SBU) A native of Jableh, Dr. Kawkab al-Dayeh, the new Minister of State for Environmental Affairs, is the only woman among the new appointees. Since receiving a Ph.D. in Pharmacy from Damascus University, she has been active in health issues, including serving as Deputy Minister of Health (1993) and Director of Health, Environment and Population at the Women's Union until her recent appointment. Dayeh is a member of the Ba'ath Party. She has two sons and a daughter. (Note: Prior to the most recent round of appointments, the Ministries of Local Administration and the Environment were unified. They had, however, originally been distinct from one another. The Ministry of the Environment was established in 1994 and then merged with the Ministry of Local Administration in 2003.)

Health

17. (C) The choice of Dr. Rida Adnan Sa'id is notable in that he is the only politically independent appointee to the cabinet. Reportedly, the previous Minister of Health was the target of rumors of corruption which are unlikely to occur with Sa'id, who is the nephew of wealthy Syrian-British philanthropist/arms dealer Wafic Sa'id. After receiving an M.D. in ophthalmology from Jesuit University in Beirut, Sa'id went on to become the Director of the Eye Hospital (1998-2007) and the Director of the Eye Bank (from 2007-present). He has also served as Deputy President of the Arab Board for Ophthalmology. Born in Damascus in 1947, Sa'id is married and has two daughters and a son. (COMMENT: Sa'id has maintained contacts with the U.S. Embassy despite questioning by Syrian intelligence. END COMMENT)

18. (C) COMMENT: Local and diplomatic contacts have told us the new appointments are not a bellwether for political reform. Rather, we have heard Asad's goal is to remind other ministers that job security is contingent on performance. It is unclear whether the appointment of Sammour to the Ministry of the Interior is an attempt by Asad to "clean house" after scandals involving SMI and Customs officials (reftel). Sammour had reportedly served as Asad's eyes and ears in the SMI, especially with regard to Shawkat. His appointment to the MOI may signal a desire on the part of Asad to increase oversight and reduce corruption. Under Abdel Majid's stewardship, the MOI had not been able to wield much power in the cabinet. With Sammour, we may see the MOI assert its leadership more robustly.

19. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: It is worth noting that the appointments are religiously diverse (Druze, Sunni, Alawite). There is a slight but discernible international flavor to the cast as two of the six appointees--'Azzam and Hija--have worked/studied in the U.S. and France. Finally, despite the unimpressive results of the previous five-year economic plan, Minister of Finance Dr. Muhammad al-Husayn, Minister of Economy and Trade Dr. Amer Husni Lutfi, and Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Abdallah Dardari all survived the shuffle unscathed. Their continued tenure suggests that

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Asad, recognizing the special circumstances surrounding the global financial crisis, has decided to give them more time to achieve results. END COMMENT.
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